



# Heritage – A Conceptually Evolving and Dissonant Phenomenon: Implications for Heritage Management and Education Practices in Post-colonial Southern Africa

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## *Abstract*

*This conceptual paper is based on experiences and insights which have emerged from my quest to develop a conceptual framework for working with the term 'heritage' within an education for sustainable development study that I am currently conducting. Of specific interest to me, and having potential to improve the relevance and quality of heritage education in southern Africa, given the region's inherent cultural diversity and colonial history, is the need for 'heritage construct inclusivity' within the processes constituting heritage education practices. Working around this broad research goal, I therefore needed to be clear about what I mean or refer to as heritage. I realised, however, how elusive and conceptually problematic the term 'heritage' is. I therefore, drawing from literature and experiences gained during field observations and focus group interviews, came up with the idea of working with three viewpoints of heritage. Drawing on real life cases I argue that current heritage management and education practices' failure to recognise and respect the evolving, interconnectedness and multi-layered nature of heritage, partly explain the same practices' lack of relevance and agency to enhance the sustainable management of local heritage resources. I also suggest a few ideas which heritage educators in the context of post-colonial southern Africa may need to consider in their everyday heritage education practices. I also introduce the notion of conceptualising heritage as 'cultural landscapes', within which the evolving, dissonant and interconnected nature of heritage, and associated heritage constructs, may be reconciled.*

## *Introduction*

There is really no such thing as heritage. I say this advisedly, and it is a statement that I will qualify, but it needs to be said to highlight the common sense assumption that 'heritage' can unproblematically be identified as 'old', grand, monumental and aesthetically pleasing sites, buildings, places and artefacts, ... what I argue, ... is rather a hegemonic discourse about heritage, which acts to constitute the way we think, talk, and write about heritage. (Smith, 2006:1)

Heritage, despite its fast becoming an increasingly used term within contemporary environment and development discourses, has largely remained conceptually problematic. According to Graham *et al.* (2000) and Smith (2006), defining heritage has always been a daunting and elusive task. This may partly be because heritage, with its hybridity and discursive nature, cannot easily be defined with any meaningful degree of universality. For this reason, scholars

like Smith (2006:11) making reference to the problematic conception of heritage, as noted in the quotation above, have even concluded that 'there is really no such thing as heritage'. Smith (2006:11) preferred to work with the notion of 'hegemonic discourse about heritage', which he went on to argue acts to constitute the way we think, talk and write about heritage.

Other scholars like Lowenthal (1990; 1996; 2005:81) have claimed that 'heritage denotes everything we suppose has been handed down to us from the past'. He (2005:81) further pointed out that what comprises heritage (what it is) differs greatly among people and over time. The word 'heritage' is therefore a slippery term that incorporates a vast range of contradictory meanings. The value that we attach to that which we call heritage is similarly contested, when viewed from a different cultural perspective.

Given the difficulties associated with conceptualising the term 'heritage', other scholars have often chosen to leave the concept undefined, choosing to work with either the notion of 'cultural heritage' or that of 'natural heritage'. At times many have opted to work with dichotomies of heritages, such as tangible or intangible. Realising the above, I therefore decided, within my study, to work with what I call the three viewpoints or frameworks for understanding heritage as a concept. These viewpoints or frameworks are: 'heritage as evolving and dissonant'; 'heritage as natural and cultural'; and 'heritage as tangible or intangible'. Using a few examples I make an attempt to make explicit the interconnected nature of heritage, and the implications that this has on heritage management and education practices in southern Africa.

### *Heritage as an 'Evolving and Dissonant' Concept*

Until recently the word 'heritage' was commonly used to refer to the inheritance that an individual receives from a deceased ancestor or what a person bequeaths to descendants (Lowenthal, 2005). Such a conceptualisation of heritage is still widespread, and explains why even today a lot of us treasure the old spoon or picture frame that we got from our forebears as heritage items. However, according to Graham *et al.* (2000:1): 'the term "heritage" has recently undergone a quantum of expansion to include almost any sort of inter-generational exchange or relationship, welcome or not, between societies as well as individuals'. In concurrence with Graham *et al.* (2000), Jimenez Perez argued that:

the concept of heritage has gone from referring to artistic works, buildings and archaeological remains (so-called historical-artistic heritage) to encompass objects, environments and phenomena (tangible and intangible) which are the result of both human activity and their interaction with nature. (Perez *et al.*, 2010:1320)

Important to note and closely linked to this evolving nature of heritage is that heritage as claimed by Graham *et al.* (2000:23) and Smith (2006) 'fulfils several inherently opposing uses and often carries conflicting meanings simultaneously'. Consequently, heritage is, as already pointed out, valued for different reasons and at different levels and between cultures, time and places (Jokiletho, 1999; Graham *et al.*, 2000; de la Torre, 2002; Smith, 2006). For instance, at an individual level, heritage is widely considered a precious and irreplaceable resource essential for

personal identity and necessary for self-respect. However, at a national level, heritage is often perceived as a resource for promoting national sovereignty, unified identity and economic development (Lowenthal, 1996; Head, 2000; Ndoro, 2005). A good example is the case of Great Zimbabwe, where national and local communities' interests were at one time in conflict (Fontein, 2006). In his doctoral thesis, Fontein (2006) claimed that people who currently live around Great Zimbabwe are excluded from the monument. To local communities, the Great Zimbabwe monument is a place of cultural significance, where they are supposed to conduct their rituals and ceremonies, and at national level the monument is being used to reconstruct a patriotic national history for the country.

Drawing from the above discussion, one may conclude that heritage is therefore an evolving and dissonant concept, which takes on different meanings at different places and times. The evolving and dissonant nature of heritage does help one to understand some of the challenges associated with ownership, value systems and access and use of heritage resources in the southern African region (Graham *et al.*, 2000; de la Torre, 2002; Smith, 2006). Examples of how the evolving and dissonant character of heritage impacts on sustainable management of heritage resources are many. In southern Africa, another notable example is the tension between the Ramunangi clan in Limpopo province and a tourism development project reflecting conflicting values and use regarding a local heritage site – the Phiphidi Falls. For the Ramunangi clan, the falls are, as in the Great Zimbabwe case, a place of cultural significance, while for the tourism developer the falls are a potential site for the construction of a holiday resort. Underlying the tensions and conflicts playing out in the two examples given above are conflicting 'constructs' or conceptions of what constitutes heritage, what it is valued for and how it should be managed and used. Management approaches and heritage education practices that address such tensions are urgently needed if we are to reduce the risks and vulnerability facing our heritage resources.

### *Heritage as Natural and/or Cultural*

Lowenthal (2005:81), other than conceptualising heritage as a constantly evolving and dissonant concept, went on to claim that heritage comes from both 'nature' and 'culture'. From Lowenthal's (2005) point of view, heritage can therefore be conceived of as either natural or cultural, and from this school of thought emerged the widely used conception of cultural and natural heritages. Accordingly, we now talk of natural heritage, as denoting natural places such as forests, mountains, grasslands, deserts, rivers and wildlife (UNESCO, 2002). Put together, this range of naturally occurring resources constitutes our natural heritage. On the other hand, we also have our cultural heritage, consisting of tangible objects such as museum collections and intangible social practices such as songs, dance, folklore, legends, rituals and ceremonies (UNESCO, 2003; 2006). It is important to note that cultural heritage entails a people's way of life and their relationship to the natural (rivers, water, soil, forests and air) and the built (urban spaces, industries, etc.) environment. From this one can argue that cultural and natural heritages are, therefore, interconnected. Lowenthal (2005) called this interconnection the nature–culture dualism.

The interconnectedness of heritages of nature and culture has important implications for both the sustainable management of heritage resources and associated heritage education practices. In emphasising the nature–culture dualism of heritage, Lowenthal argued that:

Increasingly the heritages of culture and nature came to be viewed as interconnected, and indeed indivisible. If they are twins, they are Siamese twins, separated only at high risk of demise of both. (Lowenthal, 2005:85)

Hughes (2009:30) in his recent book called *An Environmental History of the World*, challenged the idea of dichotomising natural and cultural heritage in conservation and development processes, arguing that ‘cities are not separate from the natural world on which they depend’. He alerted us to the risks of treating culture as divorced from nature by narrating how such conceptions have presented challenges for the sustainable management of both natural and cultural heritage resources. He claimed that treating nature as divorced from culture could have contributed to the abandonment of cities during ancient times, examples in the southern African region being Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe. Drawing on Prats (1997) and Mattozi (2001), Jimenez Perez *et al.* (2010) also pointed out that the term ‘heritage’ itself does not distinguish between cultural and natural manifestations. Hence all heritages are either natural or cultural but, importantly, can also be both.

The conception of heritage as intertwined or interconnected and consisting of both natural and cultural dimensions requires that we re-think the manner in which current heritage management and education practices are constituted. As mentioned earlier, underlying some of the challenges for the sustainable management of heritage resources in southern Africa is the current management approaches’ failure to perceive heritage as both natural and cultural. Or, to borrow Hughes’ (2009) words, our ‘treating nature as divorced from culture’ has contributed to fragmented and exclusive heritage policies, management and education practices, often leaving out local people’s cultural perspectives. In the case of Great Zimbabwe, as noted by Chirikure and Pwiti ‘heritage managers and archaeologists understandably became alarmed to discover that the alienation of local indigenous groups was also depriving them of valuable allies in the protection of the site’ (Chirikure & Pwiti, 2008:467). And so, by and large, unless current heritage management and education practices are also re-oriented to allow for recognition of the nature–culture dualism aspect of heritage, they will continue to do little to support the sustainable management of heritage resources (UNESCO, 2010).

A close look at the recent conflict between the National Parks and Wildlife Authority and the National Museums and Monuments in Zimbabwe over control and ownership of Victoria Falls – declared a national monument in 1932, a national park in 1957 and finally a World Heritage Site in 1989 (own emphasis) – illustrates, other than the evolving nature of heritage, the challenges caused by a fragmented view of what heritage resources are (Guvamombe & Chitumba, 2010). The Victoria Falls case begs the question: Are the falls a cultural or natural heritage resource? How one answers this question will influence how the same person may approach the management and interpretation of the falls.

Educationally, it is sad to note that the current representation of Victoria Falls to learners continues to be exclusive of the cultural histories associated with indigenous people who lived and interacted with the falls since time immemorial and arguably well before David Livingstone claimed to have discovered the falls. Tour guides continue to narrowly interpret the falls as a natural wonder historically discovered by David Livingstone. The challenge is how to reconstitute heritage education practices to help learners to construct the Victoria Falls and other heritage sites or monuments as being both natural and cultural. I suggest that such a heritage education will be broader, inclusive and more relevant in enhancing the management of heritage resources than the education practices currently taking place in most Zimbabwean museums, heritage sites and school classrooms.

### *Heritage as Tangible or Intangible*

UNESCO (2006) in its publication 'Cultural Heritage and Local Development', argued that heritage can be divided into two main categories: notably, a heritage that presents itself in a material, tangible form, such as archaeology, art, movable objects, architecture and landscape, and a heritage that is intangible but manifest in the form of knowledge and practices as well as values, norms and belief systems. Accordingly, tangible heritage resources are deemed to include all the heritages that are material in form, such as historic buildings, art and artefacts, relics, archaeological sites and monuments (Government of South Africa, 1999). Tangible heritages encompass natural resources such as the rivers, seas, soil, mountains, forests and animals (Lowenthal, 2005; Smith, 2006).

Intangible heritage, on the other hand, is perceived as incorporating a wide range of non-material aspects. These, as UNESCO (2003; 2006) puts it, include oral traditions and expressions, social practices and rituals, knowledge and practices concerning nature, as well as traditional craftsmanship. According to Munjeri (2004), intangible culture entails the wider frame within which societies function. The conservation of these intangible cultural heritages, Munjeri (2004) further argued, can be done best within the social processes that generate them.

The idea of conceiving heritage as tangible or intangible has been popularised by UNESCO, and is now widely used in heritage resources management and development, but significant for this paper is that UNESCO (2002, 2003 & 2006) also acknowledged the interconnectedness of tangible and intangible heritages. UNESCO argued that:

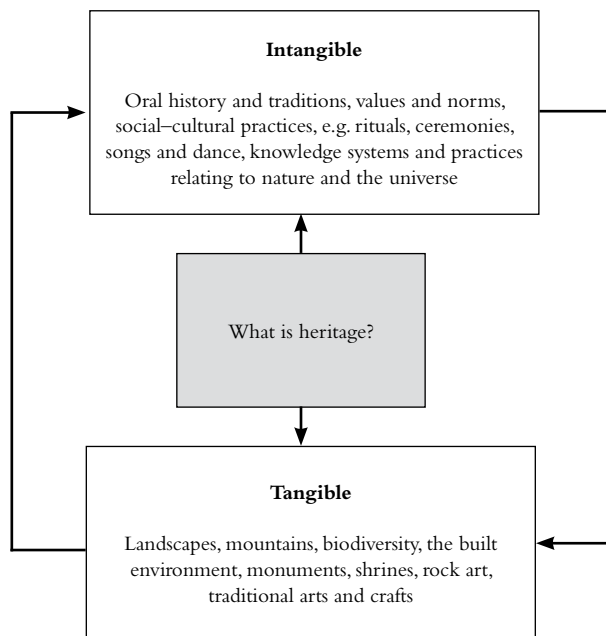
All intangible aspects such as knowledge systems, the principles of action or the values and beliefs of man, cannot be considered as heritage if they cannot be shared, and given a sensible form – words, objects, gestures, representations and even behaviours. (2006:9)

Similarly, attempting to draw our attention to the interconnectedness of tangible and intangible heritages, Ndoro (2005) pointed out that the meaning and importance imbued in monuments, like the Great Zimbabwe ruins and the Great Pyramids in Egypt, lay not only in the physical appearance but also in the reason behind their construction and existence. In concurrence, Smith (2006) argued that monument sites and rock art are not inherently valuable, but derive

value and meaning from the present day cultural processes and activities that are undertaken around them. As already highlighted, the additional value of the Phiphidi Falls in the Limpopo Province stems from the cultural practices that the Ramunangi clan conduct at the falls much more than it simply being a natural resource. Thus, the tension between the Ramunangi clan and the tourism developer may be due to both parties' failure to acknowledge the relationship between tangible and intangible aspects of heritage resources and how this determines the value and desired use of the Phiphidi Falls. This may also lie in the tendency of current heritage legislation and management practices to emphasise the material nature of heritage over its intangible aspects (Ndoro, 2005; UNESCO, 2006). Again, education practices that acknowledge the link between tangible and intangible aspects of heritage resources, as well as the evolving and dissonant nature of heritage, could go a long way in mediating challenges such as those of the Ramunangi and Phiphidi Falls.

In the diagram below, I attempt to represent the interaction between tangible and intangible heritages and how these influence people's construction of what heritage is. Important to note is that our heritage constructs are influenced and shaped by both tangible and intangible aspects tied to that which we perceive as heritage. As I argued earlier, over-emphasising one aspect over the other could be problematic and have varying implications for heritage management and education practices.

**Figure 1.** The interaction between tangible and intangible heritages and its influence on heritage construction



### *Implications for Educational Practices*

Central in my study was the desire to generate ideas that could be used to re-orient current heritage education practices towards being able to incorporate and work with a broader conception of heritage. A conception that allows heritage constructs inclusivity and acknowledges and respects the diversity of cultures in southern Africa.

Educationally, this requires that heritage educators need to:

- Carefully reflect on how heritage is being constructed within the educational processes that they engage in. Given the diverse cultures inherent in southern Africa, and the region's history of colonisation, educators may need to tread with caution and avoid the pitfalls of pushing forward one aspect of heritage, be it a historical perspective, cultural value, or related to a heritage site or object.
- Continue reflecting on their own conceptions of heritage and ensure that these are not imposed on the learners. Learners must create their own heritages rather than being passive receivers. In this way increasing the meaning and relevance of the learning opportunity is possible.
- Accept and respect that there is more than one history of a heritage site or object, and giving the learner access to all of these histories enriches the learning experience. For instance, what learners are exposed to at Victoria Falls can certainly be expanded to give a broader and inclusive view of the falls as a cultural landscape. Working with a concept of the Victoria Falls as a cultural landscape, within which the nature–culture dualism and discursive nature of heritage is accommodated, is a good idea.
- Continuously ask themselves about the heritage constructs being promoted or marginalised within the teaching and learning support materials that they are currently using. Doing so can help the educator to avoid perpetrating the exclusivity that is characteristic of current heritage education practices.

What I therefore advocate is a heritage education practice that is socio-culturally situated and inclusive of diverse constructs of what heritage is. One of the challenges that comes to mind is the question of how to achieve this type of heritage education, given that the education systems within which we work are often shaped and influenced by policy discourses that are beyond our control. Hence, maybe what we need initially is a change in heritage policies. Another challenge that also needs attention is how, in practice, to achieve an inclusive heritage education practice without becoming too relativist and falling into the trap of conceiving heritage as meaning everything and nothing.

### *Conclusion*

In this conceptual paper I have discussed the three viewpoints of heritage and how these could be influencing heritage management and education practices in southern Africa, particularly Zimbabwe. I have used a few examples to illustrate how our varying and evolving conceptions of heritage can help us to appreciate and understand some of the challenges associated with

heritage management and education in the region. Further to this I have also tried to offer a few ideas that heritage educators can start to consider in their quest to make current heritage education practices more inclusive, relevant and supportive of the management and protection of the region's diverse heritage resources. In this paper I have hopefully opened up space for heritage practitioners to continue engaging critically with the notion of heritage and how their conceptions influence practice. I have also, even though not fully, interrogated the idea of working with the notion of cultural landscapes, hoping that readers might be interested in following it up.

### *Note on the Contributor*

Cryton Zazu is a full time PhD scholar at Rhodes University's Environmental Learning Research Centre (ELRC). His research interest is in exploring opportunities for re-orienting environmental education practices (heritage education included) towards being socio-culturally inclusive in both epistemology and pedagogy. Email: claytonzazu@fastmail.fm

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